An approach to the Understanding of Islam
By: Dr. Ali Shariati

The Second Night's Lecture

AS AN INTRODUCTION to tonight's lecture, I think it will not be irrelevant to mention a few points before starting the main subject of my lecture. These points which I will mention may not directly relate to my basic words, but they are, nevertheless, vital and essential. There is great urgency that they be mentioned. In the past few years, intellectuals have come to the conclusion that speaking of our sufferings is useless. As a matter of fact, up until now, we have only talked about it. It is time to do something about it. The time for talking is over. Everyone must begin to actively reform his family and environment.

In my opinion, there is a kind of nonchalance which has occurred about this subject because up until now we have not spoken about suffering. We have not made a scientific and exact analysis of it. We have just complained. It is obvious that simply groaning about pain is useless. Up until now we have never talked of our psychological and social anguishes correctly. A misunderstanding as to suffering may arise, but I must regretfully say that we do not recognize it at all.

Those who have put the experience into practice, who have experienced pain, who have seen difficulties, divisions, who have had misfortune, are people who experience the actual stage. They know and sense how our speaking about pain is really at a minimum. They know what little possibilities and awarenesses we have to recognize pain, corruption and deviations. Not only have we not spoken enough about our ideologies, our school of thought and our religion, but we have not really spoken about it at all.

How can we say that we know our sufferings and have talked about them enough and that now it is the time for action? We are a religious society. Our religion should be the basis of our science, but we do not even know our religion as yet.

When my students ask me as a teacher for some books about the problems, I am ashamed when I have to answer them. It is shameful that no books exist about these problems.

Our nation has for centuries had the honor of following the Jafari School of Islam and Ali. Iran accepted Islam in the first century of the hegira. It replaced its former religion with Islam. It became the follower of the School of Ali and his companions and his form of government whether officially as now or in respect to sentiment, belief and faith as before. But today when a

student wants a book in order to be able to study about Ali or in order to be able to know who the first followers of Ali were who laid the foundations of the history of Shi'ite Islam in the first century and remained loyal to him in those most difficult times, I have to tell him that there are none. We know some existed, but we know them by name only. It is disgraceful for a nation whose religion is the religion of Ali, not to have one good book written about him and his companions. It is shameful that Georges Jourdaq, a Christian, introduces Ali to us after 14 centuries and that Jaudat as-Sahhar, a Sunni brother, introduces Abuzar.

Salman Farsi was the first Iranian who accepted Islam. He holds a place of honor among the Aryan race and Iranians. He is a great man who accepted the Prophet's invitation to Islam. He got so close to the Prophet that he became part of his family. A man who holds such a place of honor in both a national and a religious sense, does not have even four pages of a book written about him in Persian. But, a Frenchman has written about him.

I do not know how we can claim that the stage of knowing and speaking is finished and that it is time for action. I don't want to say that it is not the time for action for all of these things should go together. The Prophet of Islam never divided his life into two parts where one part would be devoted to action only and the other to speaking only. It is not correct to say that we have talked too much and should not speak at all. We have just complained. This and groaning should be put aside and we should speak of suffering in a scientific manner. The school we believe in should be the basis of our work, our activity and our thoughts. We should know what kind of man Ali was. We should know about Abuzar, Salman and the Companions of the Prophet and Ali.

Unfortunately, no valuable or readable book about them exists which is both respected from the point of view of religion as well as from the point of view of humanity. They come into Persian through translation We have yet to write anything ourselves. A person who knows the Qur'an nowadays is called a distinguished person, not a scholar. Scholars are in a stage beyond. The distinguished are they who know the Qur'an, the history of Islam and the Prophet and his Companions. They explain and interpret the Qur'an and practice it. These people are the distinguished which really means second-hand scholars of Islam. If we look at it this way, the Prophet Mohammad himself, Ali and Abuzar are among the distinguished men of Islam, not the scholars of Islam.

Thus, I believe that the most urgent task before us is to speak of what afllicts us, to speak about it exactly, study it scientifically and come to know it. All the sufferings of those who tried to reform their society in Islamic countries, proved to be either futile or with little result. The reason was that while operating, they did not know what needed to be done. It is certain that until we know what we want, we will not know what to do. Therefore, our first task is to know our religion and school of thought but, unfortunately, after centuries connecting this religion, we are just now beginning to come to know it.

As I said in last night's lecture, there are different ways of coming to know Islam. One of them is knowing God and comparing that knowledge with the concept held in respect to other deities. Or, we can come to know the Qur'an and compare it with other books. We can study the personality of the Prophet of Islam and compare it with other personalities who as reformers have existed throughout the long history of humanity. Or, we can come to know the distinct and distinguished individuals of that faith and compare them to ones in other faiths.

It is the duty of today's intellectuals to know Islam as a school which revives humanity, that is, both the individual and society. The mission of Islam is to direct the future of humanity. Intellectuals must see this as an irreplaceable duty. They need to take a good look at this religion and its outstanding personalities from the angle of whatever their particular field of study happens to be. As Islam has many different dimensions and manifestations, everyone can find new and detailed areas which relate to his or her special subject. As my study was the sociology of religion, I tried to compile a kind of sociology of religion on the basis of Islam using the terms inferred and acquired from the content of the Qur'an. In the course of my study, I came up with new problems which I had never even imagined. For example, as a result of studying Islam and the Qur'an, I discovered scientific suggestions of history and sociology which reflect the Prophet's customs. This is just the opposite of what happens when we try to analyze and interpret the Qur'an as philosophy or when we use today's science to study the policies of the Prophet or the political, social, psychological and moral system which he presented to society. No. The problem is something else. It is that I actually inferred many new problems in history and sociology from the Qur'an. The Qur'an and Islam gave me the idea but, I found new themes that relate to history, sociology and the human sciences Upon turning to them, I continued my research and

I became certain that I had realized something important. Through the help of the Qur'an, I have found some important problems in today's human sciences which that science does not even take into consideration. One is the question of migration. In my lecture entitled 'Mohammad, the Seal of the Prophets,' the question was considered solely from a historical point of view as the migration of a tribe from one place to another. I have discovered that migration is just the opposite of that which Moslems feel it to be when we look to the Qur'an, read about migration and the Emigrants, [the people who accompanied the Prophet from Mecca to Medina], the life of the Prophet and generally, migration at the beginning of Islam. It was not just a historical accident or event. Moslems consider the migration to have consisted of a group of men who were banned from Mecca and then ordered by the Prophet to go to Ethiopia and Medina. Migration, in historic terms, is considered to be the transfer of a primitive tribe from one place to another because of geographic or political causes. Islam considers it to be an event which took place and affected the life of Moslems and the Prophet of Islam.

Migration is a deep philosophic and social principle. By referring to history, I discovered that migration is an extremely important and magnificent principle. It is not simply what the historian

sees it to be. Even the philosophers of history have not paid attention to the question of migration. What I say now is that migration has been a factor infiuencing the whole of history.

All of the twenty-seven civilizations which we know historically, resulted from migrations. There is not one exception to this rule. According to records, a primitive tribe would become civilized and would create a higher culture only when it moved from its place, when migrating from the land it had lived in.

I have inferred this matter. There is no reference to it in history or sociology. My inference came from Islam, from the subject of migration as it is expressed in the Qur'an and the reference to it as a continuing system.

All of the world's civilizations, from the most recent, that is, America, to the oldest, which is Sumer, have been established through subsequent migrations. This means that a primitive tribe remained primitive while it remained in its own land. As soon as migration took place and they were settled in a new land, it reached what could be called civilization. Thus, all civilizations are the result of the migration of primitive tribes.

There are many questions which I came to understand through the Qur'an. The amount of information contained within it has helped me to better understand historical and sociological problems and see them in a new light. Therefore, I have arrived at this method which is to use the special terms of the Qur'an. In this way, one can discover so many approaches which can be applied to the newest of sciences, the human sciences.

The greatest problem of history and sociology and, in particular, of the sociology of Islam, is to find the main cause of changes of societies. What is the main factor which causes a society to change and transform or suddenly be overthrown and decay? What factor causes a society to arrive at a positive mutation so that in one or two centuries its material and spiritual form and content change and cause all individual and social relationships to change, as well? This is a problem which has continued for centuries. For the last 110 years, it has been frankly considered with care in sociological and historical studies. The question which is always presented is "What is the motor of history and the fundamental factor for change and transformation of human societies?"

Here is where the science of sociology breaks down when every school emphasizes one aspect of the problem. Some schools actually do not believe in history and consider history to be a collection of past narrations. They consider it to be worthless. These groups do not accept any law or fact as a standard for sociology. A kind of scientific anarchism exists in the world which is actually pessimistic in regard to the philosophy of sociology and human sciences. It regards accidents as the major factor and says that changes, mutations and revolutions, which exist in nations, are all created by accident.

For example, the Arabs attack Iran and Iran is accidently defeated. The Iranians become Moslems and Ghengis Khan attacks Iran, by accident, and Iran's government just happens to be weak so it is defeated along with that of Islam and the Iranian way of life. They all change places. These major factors are all regarded as accident.

The other group are the materialists who believe in a totalistic view of history. They believe that history and society, from the beginning until now, is like a tree. This tree, without a will of its own, was a seed which split, grew out of the earth having established its roots and then developed stem and leaf. It started to grow and has since developed into a large tree. It is obliged to give forth fruits and blossoms at the beginning of the spring. It is obliged to evolve and to decay. This group also believes that throughout history, human societies survive because of the effect of determining laws which exist in society, like laws which are in nature. Therefore, the beliefs of individuals do not in anyway interfere in the fate of their societies. Society is a natural phenomenon which grows from the effects of natural laws.

The third group believe that personalities direct history such as the fascists and Nazis. Great scholars such as Carlyle, who wrote the life of the Prophet of Islam, and Emerson, and so forth, are included in this group. They believe that laws are mere tools in the hands of humanity and that they have no effect upon society. To their way of thinking, the average person or lower than average person has no share in changing society. They are considered to be simply tools as well. The only factor which reforms societies, develops them or causes their decadence is great personalities. Emerson says, 'Give me ten great personalities and I will tell you the history of humanity without reading a book. Introduce me to the Prophet of Islam so I can tell you the history of Islam. Introduce Napoleon to me and I will declare the history of modern Europe?'

From this point of view, the fate of society and humanity is in the hands of great personalities who are the leaders of our society. Therefore, the rise or decline of societies neither depends upon the people nor does it result from the effect of determined laws of the environment and society, nor do they result from mere accidents. Rather, everything is in the hands of great personalities who appear from time to time in society and change its fate and sometimes change the fate of humanity.

Carlyle writes, in describing the life of the Prophet of Islam, 'The Prophet of Islam was rejected in his first invitation to his relatives. Hazrat Ali, who was 10 years old, stood up and gave a positive answer to the invitation and swore allegiance.' Then Carlyle sums up the basis of his way of thinking, 'This small hand, which was placed upon the great hand, changed the course of history.' There is no school of thought, new or old, democrat or otherwise which believes that the masses of the people are the major factor of the transformation and change in our society. The schools of democracy believe that the best form of government is a government in which people participate. But from the beginning of the democracy of Athens until now, no school has believed that people

are the major factor in bringing about change and transformation in society. This means that the more democratic of sociologists believe that the best way to govern and form an administrative organization is one in which people participate, vote and choose the government. They do not however, regard those people as the fundamental factor in the transition and change of society. But rather, they either take the determinist point of view or great personalities as being the essential factor or else they believe in accidents or the probability of the divine will as being the main factor of change.

Those who follow the personality-cult theory are divided into two groups. One group believes that a great personality like Buddha or Moses or Jesus change society. These are the individualists. The other group believes that first a personality appears and is then followed by a group of specialists, geniuses and distinguished men of the tribe who surround him and form a group. This group is called 'elite' and it is they who will lead society towards their aims. They are known as 'elite-worshippers.'

But both Islam and the Qur'an have another point of view. As a rule, in Islam, the greatest personality is the Prophet. If Islam were to believe in the role of the great personality as the basic factor of transformation and change in society and history, then they would regard all the prophets and especially, the Prophet of Islam, as the basic factor of transformation and change.

But it is other than this. It is something more than the qualities and mission of the Prophet of Islam which are clearly described in the Qur'an and relate to bringing a message. He is responsible for communicating the message. He is the harbinger of good news. He even gets upset when he cannot lead people the way he wants to and when they do not listen to his words. God explains to him repeatedly, in so many words, 'Your mission is only to communicate the message. You should not be frightened. Give news to the people and show them the way. You are not in any way responsible for their progress.'

The Prophet, in the Qur'an, is not regarded as the major factor in the transformation and change of history, but is introduced as a messenger who should reveal the school of thought and the way of Truth to the people. His mission ends here. It is up to the people, then, to choose that school of thought or not, to be guided or not. There is no room for the accident theory in this religion because all of the affairs are in the hands of God. Therefore, accident, meaning an event without any cause or any final goal in creation, is unimaginable either in nature or in human society. Even the other prophets or great personalities who are recalled in the Qur'an are done so with a feeling of pessimism. If it talks about them as being righteous and pure, it never counts them as being an effective factor in the transformation and change of their society.

Generally, the people addressed in every school of thought and religion are the fundamental and effective factor of change of that society in that school of thought. According to this, we see that in all the various parts of the Qur'an, the people (al-nas) themselves are addressed. The Prophet

is sent on a mission to the people. He speaks to the people. He is questioned and investigated by the people. He is a transition factor to promote the people. The people are responsible for society and history.

The word, people, is a valuable word. The only word that is close to it, is mass (tudeh). In sociology, mass means the body of the people without any regard to class distinction or indicators which would distinguish them from other human groups. Therefore, mass means people without considering the special, classical form or group of their society.

The words human being (insan) and mankind (bashar) also refer to people, but human being connotes a moral quality and mankind refers to people when their animal properties are included. The synonym, mass, means simply, people, without any additional classification.

Here a new matter is inferred and it is that Islam is the first social school of thought which considers the people to be the basis and fundamental factor of society and history as well as responsible for the divisions within history and society. It is not the chosen that Nietzsche speaks about nor the nobles and aristocrats which Plato refers to. It is not the great personalities of Carlyle and Emerson, nor the pure-blooded people of Alexis Carrel nor the clergy and intellectuals, but the fabric of the people.

It is important to study this and compare it with other schools of thought. To whom do the different schools of thought speak? Some schools talk to the educated and intellectuals; another to the distinguished or chosen group. Another talks to a superior group or race and still another to supermen. We find yet another which pays attention to a special class of society such as the proletariat or the bourgeoisie.

But none of these privileged groups exist in Islam. The fundamental factor of change and transition of society are people without regard to their special form, face, class distinction or any other classification.

Another important factor inferred from the Qur'an is that, as it addresses the people, they are responsible for the fundamental aims, at the same time that they are the major force in shaping the fate of society through personality, accident and tradition. Therefore, we can say that personality, tradition, accident and the masses are the four fundamental forces which cause transformation and change in society.

Tradition is inferred from Islam and the Qur'an. Society has an undisputable origin. As the Qur'an points out, society has one way, one policy, that is, a special nature. Actually all societies have determined views of certain unchangeable laws. Society is like a living creature which, like every living thing, follows certain determined, unchangeable scientific laws. Because of this, all transformations and changes of society are built upon certain traditions. At this point, it seems

like Islam approaches a deterministic interpretation of history and sociology but Islam does not stop here. It emphasizes that both human society and the individual are responsible for their fate.

For them is the reward which they have earned and you shall have that which you earn, (2:134) and *Verily God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves,* (13:11). These two verses show social responsibility whereas, *Every soul is held in pledge for what it earned,* shows the responsibility of the individual .

Both society and the individual have a responsibility towards the Creator while each, at the same time, determines his own destiny. Not only are these two phenomena not contradictory, but they actually complement each other.

It is the same in nature. A farmer is responsible for the fruit of the trees of the garden and the growth of the plants. He is responsible to get the best fruit from the plants and trees. Therefore, he is responsible to a certain extent for the product. On the other hand, we know that certain laws exist in nature which form the basis for the changes and transformations of plants and vegetables. These are determined, unchangeable laws.

Therefore, human beings, according to their particular science or field of work, can employ the unchangeable laws inherent in the plants. A farmer can never enact a new law in nature nor can he destroy any other existing laws. The laws which exist in nature forcibly are imposed upon the farmer and he cannot change them. At the same time, he has the power to change the fixed customs and laws of botany through scientific devices and employ these forced laws whose change is out of the question. He can change an average fruit into a superior one through the laws which exist. The responsibility of a human being in society is just this. That is, society is like a garden, founded upon God's Customs. Through these, it grows and evolves. But the human being has a responsibility. He or she cannot simply accept the fatalist's point of view or the view of historic determinism and by doing so, release himself or herself from being responsible. A human being cannot put aside his or her responsibility when faced with the fate of that society. The Qur'an, while admitting that society is built upon unchangeable laws, does not, in any way, deny the responsibility of humanity and human beings. In this school of thought, they are responsible to know the customs and to reform them as society evolves. How? Through their own knowledge.

Why does a farmer have more responsibility to improve and develop his fields? Because he has more knowledge of these customs and as a result he has more freedom to change the fate of the trees and plants. The greater the human being's knowledge of the customs and rules of society, the more responsibility he has as well as more freedom in changing and transforming society. The religion of Islam, if we see it as a sociological school of thought, believes that the changes and transformations of society are not just based upon accident, because society is a living creature, and has unchangeable scientific and human customs. Human beings have a free will by

which they can build and predict a better fate for their society as well as the individual, through their participation in its principles and customs. The responsibility of human beings is created in the belief that society is like a living creature which reacts according to scientific laws. Thus, from one point of view, human being means, will, and from another, society, that is custom or tradition. According to the Qur'an, customs are incapable of change and the human being is directly responsible for the individual and society. Therefore the human being is free to be active and to work but at the same time, he is obliged to follow the rules existing in nature in order to exercise that freedom.

Personality, in Islam, is not considered to be the creative force. Even the prophets are not considered to be personalities who bring about new customs in their society. From the point of view of sociology, virtues of the prophets in relationship to other teachers— excluding their prophetic function—is that they have known and understood the divine hand in nature better than reformers do. It is because of this that they have been better able to use their freedom as human beings to succeed in their goals in society. History has shown it to be true. The prophets were more successful than non-prophetic reformers.

Reformers have often expressed better human theses and slogans in their books but they have not changed their society. They have built no civilizations. It is the prophets who have built societies and histories. It is not that they have enacted new customs when faced with the divine law as the fascists and hero-worshippers say. Rather, they have discovered the customs of God in society and nature through their prophetic powers. They attained their goal and their mission by following these customs through their will power. The theory of accident has no philosophic meaning in Islam either because God actually directly and continously intervenes in all affairs. As accident does not have a logical cause or a final goal, it cannot originate in society or nature.

There is a kind of accident, if we look at its particular meaning, which plays a role in the fate of humanity. For instance, Ghengis Khan appears in Mongolia. He gains control through the current social customs. He creates a great force, but the defeat of Iran at the hands of Ghengis, is an accident which might not have occurred. Accidents such as these do occur which may affect some societies. As we have noted, there are four factors, personality, accident, custom and the masses, which effect the fate of societies but from the point of view of Islam, the most effective of them are the factors of the masses and custom because the masses represent the will of the fabric of the people and custom refers to scientific laws existing in society. The ratio of the role of each of these factors in the fate of society depends upon the conditions of that society. In a society where mankind means the mass and the people are progressive, for the most part, and they have reached the highest stage of discipline and culture, the role of personality is less. However, in societies which have not reached this stage of civilization like a tribe or a family, a leader or personality can be more effective. Therefore, in every different stage of society from the point of view of development or backwardness, one of these four mentioned factors has more effect as compared to the other three.

In Islam, the personality of the Prophet plays a fundamental role in the transformation, change and mutation of the structure of the future civilization as well as in changing the direction of history because the Prophet of Islam appears in a particular geographic area (the Arabian peninsula) where civilization is just like its geography. It is a peninsula which is surrounded on three sides by the sea but it is thirsty and dry and has no water. Its neighbors, on all sides, have hosted great civilizations. To the north there was the civilization of Greece and Eastern Rome; to the east, Iran's civilization; on the southeast, the Indian civilization and to the northeast, the Hebrew civilization. The religions founded by Moses, Jesus, Zoroaster as well as the great Aryan and Semetic civilizations all neighbor it. When the Prophet of Islam appears, some of these civilizations are thriving around the peninsula but in the same way that the special geographic condition of this peninsula is such that the vapor of the water of the sea does not enter the peninsula, none of these civilizations leave the least trace upon the peninsula. Therefore, according to sociologists, the Prophet of Islam is the greatest factor in the change and transformation of his society. A historian sees a great wave of accident which came into being in the 7th century A.D. in the Arabian peninsula. It dissolved all of its surroundings. It brought a great civilization and society into being. It is here that the historian must necessarily relate the great wave and all of the thoughts and changes of this greatest of transformations in the history of mankind which is Islam, to the person of Mohammad, son of Abdullah, after studying the peninsula, where there is a total vacuum of culture and civilization and where the masses live under the most difficult of circumstances. The personality of the Prophet contains special and exceptional conditions.

There are, generally speaking, five factors which build human beings. The first is the factor of the mother who builds the structure and spiritual dimension of humanity. The Jesuits say, 'Give me your child until the child is seven years old and after that, wherever the child goes, he will remain a Jesuit until the end of his life. A mother nourishes the human spirit, giving depth, subtlety and feelings to it. Her special gestures give the nursing child its first lesson. The second factor in building a human being is the father who constructs other dimensions of the child's soul. The third factor which builds the form and clear dimensions of the human being is a school. The fourth is environment and society. As the environment is powerful and greater, it will have more effect on human beings. For example, the effect of the environment differs from a person who lives in a village to one who lives in a big city. The fifth factor in building human beings is the general culture of the nation or the general culture of the world.

Therefore, five moulds or dimensions exist which, in total, make the framework into which the human spirit is poured and later extracted.

Education takes a special shape which is given to the human spirit for particular goals because if a person receives no education, he or she grows in a way which proves to be useless for society

and our aims. We give the person shapes so that when he or she grows up, they are useful to society.

But in the life of the Prophet of Islam, which should be the greatest factor of personality in the transformation and change of history, none of those above mentioned factors influenced his spirit. Actually it was the intention that no shape be imposed upon him, no form of artificial discipline be given to him as is normally given to a human being in his own time and through his own environment. He had been sent to break all idols and if he himself had grown into one, he would not have been able to accomplish his mission. It would be possible, for example, that he become a great physician but in the Greek mould or become a great philosopher but in the Iranian mould or become a mathematician but in the moulds suitable to that time. However, he has been sent on a mission to grow in an environment empty of culture and civilization and not to accept any of these moulds.

That is why, as he opens his eyes, he does not see his father but the hand which should take him away from any form by leading him into the desert. It was the custom of Arabs at that time to take their children to the desert until they were two years old in order to spend the period of breast feeding in the desert and then return to the city and grow near their mother.

But Mohammad had just the opposite experience. As soon as he is taken to Mecca, he is returned to the desert. He lives there until he is five years old. His mother dies soon afterwards. These particular devices for developing children are put aside and kept at a distance so that he can later break the Greek, Arab, Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian moulds and create a new mould, a new shape. Again on the excuse of being a shepherd, fate leads him from the city into the desert so that the city and the environment of the city do not print their suitable or favorable moulds upon his spirit which should flow freely. Because the spirit of society does not influence him, he develops in a society which is actually part of general culture. He is unlettered. The school and its mould is not imposed upon him.

We see that the greatest encounter of the personality which is to have this great mission is to keep him removed from all schools of thought, all moulds which are acceptable in his time which moulds people to be like them. This happens so that the man who has to destroy all fire temples, close all academies and build mosques in their place, the man who must break all racial, indigenous and regional moulds, will himself have no particular mould before he is born so that one of the first dimensions is not imprinted upon him. His mother is kept at a distance from him so that the kindness and caresses of a mother will not influence his spirit through the delicateness of a lyric poem, for it must become hard and powerful. He is born into a dry peninsula which is far from any general culture so that this great spirit takes no culture, civilization or faith unto itself. The spirit which must patiently bear and bring about this most unusual mission, cannot take form in any normal mould. This constraint is the greatest possible

benefit which could be bestowed upon this personality who must play the principal role in this unparalled event of history.